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ABSTRACT

LearnShare is a consortium of non-competing companies that share training expertise and innovative practices. Evolving the concept of a collaborative approach to training, LearnShare combines the best training practices and programs of the partners with leading-edge distance learning technology. The result provides LearnShare members electronic access to proven training materials and enables them to participate in and benefit from research and development opportunities in multimedia and distance learning practices. This paper highlights: (1) background on LearnShare, including the consortium's benefits, goals, and vision; (2) LearnShare processes, including its evolution, organizational structure, research objectives, and technologies used; (3) impact, including critical success factors, objectives that would reduce members' capital investment, and information contained in quarterly reports; and (4) LearnShare as a model for future instructional design, development, and delivery. (Author/AEF)

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The LearnShare Consortium: A Model for the Future

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Abstract: LearnShare is a consortium of non-competing companies who share training expertise and innovative practices. Evolving from CEO Rick Corry's concept of a collaborative approach to training, LearnShare combines the best training practices and programs of the partners with leading-edge distance learning technology. The result provides LearnShare members electronic access to proven training materials and enables them to participate in and benefit from research and development opportunities in multimedia and distance learning practices.

1. Introduction

The decentralization of organizations, rapidly evolving workplace technologies, and expanded information/skills requirements, are moving corporate training initiatives toward more flexible, highly specialized training delivery systems. This requires the design of interactive, customized, self-paced programs that use a wide range of communication technologies. How can a training organization meet these evolving needs on an ever-tightening training budget?

Fourteen non-competing Fortune 500 corporations found an answer to this question. They formed a training consortium to share training expertise and innovative practices—and, by so doing, improved the quality of their training while reducing their individual costs.

LearnShare, the consortium these companies created, is dedicated to sharing resources for the enhanced development of technology-based learning modules. Its members - diverse companies with proven expertise and innovative practices - enhance their competitive advantage through access to learning technologies and an effort to share their respective strengths.

Through "share sourcing" the consortium provides its members with the help they need to expand into the global marketplace. The consortium offers such assistance via the following benefits:

- cost-effective training curriculum that shares best practices
- reduction in cycle time from learning to action outcomes
- opportunities to leverage technology
- an expansive content library
- improved employee performance
- enhanced customer relationships
- extensive partnering with premier companies.

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2. Background

At a vendor presentation in May of 1995, a training professional attendee asked why organizations continued to invest in training programs that they would not own and for which they continued to pay licensing and per-use fees. Other attendees expressed an interest in his concern and asked him to devise a plan. The training

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professional presented his idea to his organization's management and received preliminary funding to explore the concept further with other non-competing corporations.

In October 1995, eighteen non-competing corporations were invited to attend a meeting to discuss establishing a collaborative training consortium. During that meeting, many of the attendees recognized the commonality of their training issues, and believed that a consortium could lower their training costs, expand their owned curricula, and improve the quality of their training. Moreover, they believed that they could fund this consortium themselves with the expectation that it would be self-sustaining in a few years.

Encouraged by the meeting, the training professional who initiated the consortium idea received additional support from his organization in the form of office space, equipment, and personnel. Officially created in October of 1995, the LearnShare consortium was established as a limited liability corporation in order to ensure that only non-competing organizations became members. In September of 1996, nine non-competing companies agreed to join the consortium as funding partners: each would contribute $100,000 a year for two years and would receive a seat on the Board of Directors. The idea originator (the training professional) was selected as General Manager.

At LearnShare's establishment, the consortium developed the following goals:

- to identify and partner with major corporations that have first-class training and performance practices in place
- to create a new competitive advantage for consortium members through the use of learning technology and state-of-the-art content
- to include universities, state and federal agencies, and other resources to maximize impact and output
- to achieve measurable cost savings in business education at many levels throughout the corporation

Next, the vision created by the consortium embraced not only the member's priorities, but also the needs of individual employees and the role to be played by their vendors and consultants. The consortium's vision for the year 2000 is to:

- extend learning into the workplace and home
- make learning accessible anywhere in the world, 24 hours per day
- ensure that learning applies to all individuals (at all levels and in all geographic locations)
- use leading-edge technology to deliver training
- focus learning on performance and the achievement of business goals and strategies
- foster the delivery of training in smaller segments, on demand, and with immediate applications
- improve performance through the full range of development alternatives including, but not limited to, training
- use uniform training and development tracking to both evaluate individual progress and to drive decision making
- use needs assessment to drive learning priorities and reallocate resources effectively
- ensure that learning occurs on individual, team and organizational levels
- establish partnerships with key vendors and consultants
- ensure that synergy occurs across businesses in all aspects of the learning process and in the use of resources

According to the general manager of the LearnShare consortium, "the fundamental purpose of the consortium is to serve as a clearinghouse for leading-edge employee training, and to eventually set the standard for customer training as well. The consortium will be a dynamic organization that will continually seek new partners, evaluate its effectiveness, and reconfigure accordingly.

LearnShare's culture encourages communication and trust among its members and partners. This results in the open sharing of existing training and development materials, human talent, and corporate-wide resources. Share sourcing enables the members to share existing programs, the cost of creating new materials, and solutions to common challenges. It also allows its members to collaborate on both training and non-training issues by tapping into their collective expertise and experiences. The culture is defined by a structured operating agreement

and nurtured by frequent meetings, a highly collaborative project management process, and a sophisticated communications system.

LearnShare is usually introduced into member companies through their human resources, training and development, and sales and marketing departments. These departments are the first subscribers to the process and the disseminators of information about the value of the process to other departments. Widespread member use of the consortium's programs is then promoted by linking LearnShare's web site to the companies' web sites. By accessing LearnShare's web site via its own web site, each business unit within the member companies can preview the programs and can place orders to receive training programs. As a result, the member's internal departments - financial, health and safety, manufacturing, and management - have become involved with the LearnShare concept.

3. Process

Starting its third year, LearnShare has followed an established evolutionary trajectory. Initial enthusiasm and support carried the idea forward, in rapid succession, from conception to discussion, collaboration, implementation, and funding. Once the board of directors was established, further phases of curriculum exchange and development began. Additionally, the board began the planning required for the consortium to be come self-sustaining (through grants and access fees from members' customers) within two years.

The consortium exists to advance learning based on the best available technology. At the core of the consortium's strength are best practices and shared experiences, which provide the vitality to keep the organization moving forward. Beyond the financial and structural commitment to the consortium, each member organization freely shares its best practices and expertise.

The original purpose of the consortium - to improve the quality of training and reduce overall training costs - now includes an effort to better business education by using an innovative sharing process to improve content, technology, and delivery, including multimedia and distance learning opportunities. To achieve this objective, the consortium enlisted the assistance of the educational community. LearnShare added to its membership three universities with expertise in multimedia, distance learning, and evolving technologies that could be used for training delivery and that could significantly bolster the consortium's efforts.

The consortium's member organizations are leaders within their respective industries that have demonstrated innovation in an array of skill areas. Each member organization contributes the expertise of its training professionals, as well as $100,000 per year for two years to fund the consortium's initial work. These contributions resulted in membership revenues of $1.8 million: the consortium's first two-year budget was $1.1 million. Major cost categories in the budget have been in program development and staffing.

All participating organizations agreed to the consortium's operating agreement and to provide a representative to the board of directors. The fourteen companies of the consortium employ 2.2 million people and have revenues in excess of $400 billion.

The consortium's member organizations systematically share and develop educational materials. In addition, university faculty research teams interact with inter-company program development teams as they share and create world-class training materials. Members reduce their training costs through joint funding of common learning needs and maximum use of existing resources. The consortium's size provides an advantage in negotiating volume-discount purchase rates and provides them with greater flexibility in the design and use of vendor-developed products.

LearnShare developed an organizational structure that consists of six levels: 1) Board of Directors; 2) General Manager and Administrative Support; 3) Strategic Planning and Research Support; 4) Project Manager, Sales and Marketing Manager, and Technology Manager; 5) Resource Manager and Technical Editor; 6) Project

Teams.

The board of directors consists of one representative from each of the consortium member organizations. The board meets three times per year, and each board member has a single vote. Board responsibilities include, but are not limited to, setting policies, prioritizing training projects, and approving the operating budget.

The general manager reports to the board of directors and is responsible for developing consortium membership and for maintaining its focus. The general manager's functions include development of relationships with the member organizations; leadership of the investigations of state-of-the-art delivery options; joint development of world-class skill modules; and exploration of federal, state and local government participation in and support of the process. The administrative assistant reports to the general manager, provides administrative and secretarial support, and functions as the office manager.

The director of strategic planning and research reports to the general manager and works with representatives from Arizona State University, Fairleigh Dickinson University, Ohio State University, and all other schools deemed appropriate by the board. This position helps coordinate the research and external funding initiatives established by the board.

The senior project manager also reports to the general manager. This position manages each LearnShare project team, supervises the building and maintenance of the resource library, manages the project innovation process, and coordinates the work of the member universities with LearnShare's member companies.

The sales and marketing manager reports to the general manager as well. This position manages the development and implementation of the internal marketing plan for launching LearnShare within member organizations, and also handles all negotiations with outside vendors for the LearnShare member companies.

The technology manager reports to the general manager and is the liaison between LearnShare, the consortium member organizations and vendors for all technical issues.

The resource manager reports to the manager of sales and marketing. This position manages the LearnShare resource library, directs order fulfillment, maintains resource data and provides direct product support to LearnShare members.

The technical editor reports to the senior project manager and edits all LearnShare library materials, oversees compliance to LearnShare product standards, conducts research, and negotiates copyright releases.

The project teams are managed by the senior project manager. Each project team consists of representatives from LearnShare's member organizations, an appropriate subject matter expert, and an online developer. The team members are selected from member organizations according to their skills, abilities and initiative. Each project team is responsible for the development of a specific program, identified and prioritized by the board of directors.

Headquartered in Toledo, Ohio, the consortium has branches in many other locations. The headquarters office provides a focal point for the strategic development, collaboration, warehousing, and dissemination of a full spectrum of training and development products and services to participating organizations.

The consortium management is responsible for: ensuring the strategic linkage of each team activity to organizational goals; monitoring deliverables development, timeline/milestone achievement, and budget expenditures; and, adjusting team activities to be responsive to members' needs, competitive challenges, or other factors.

The Consortium staff conducts industry analyses to determine the needs of each partner and provides accurate analyses of available products and services to meet those needs. They serve as a clearninghouse for available

products and services; provide information, orientation and demonstrations; and maintain a catalog of currently owned products and services. Initially, most of the files in the consortium's content library were text based, but the entries have been expanded to include multimedia resources and CD-ROM materials. This format allows for easy conversion to online training as new technologies emerge. Additionally, members have access to an expanding library of training resources, and by choosing programs designed in partner organizations, members have the opportunity to see the topic through another's eyes. Shared programs offer users new ways to look at challenges and to increase their expertise.

The staff helps participating organizations to acquire and implement the desired products and services or to create high-quality, low-cost alternatives. They also spearhead new product and service research efforts between corporate and university partners. Further, they seek external funding through grants and other opportunities and coordinate the use of the consortium's installed base of technological hardware.

LearnShare has established a web site that lists all available training, and includes a directory of high-quality suppliers and vendors. The site also provides information about training news and events, a chat room for individual employee input, and a "request for help" area.

The consortium is a model for integrating and aligning multiple learning and development approaches and practices designed to achieve aligned outcomes. It was designed to address an ever-expanding series of learning needs in a way that takes advantage of a uniquely networked group. The Consortium accelerates the development of learning technology through the immediate expansion of resources and provides efficient, effective design, development, and delivery of training. Its unique structure enables it to meet current learning needs and to adapt itself quickly to meet future needs.

The consortium is continually revised as it experiments with ways to integrate it's design structure with extenuating factors and to produce high-quality products.

The use of leading-edge technology to facilitate the training and development process is central to the Consortium's value to participating organizations. It's design enables it to use its members' considerable technology infrastructure and the consortium's educational partners to develop and deliver the most innovative training and development products available. Decisions about the selection and use of new technologies are driven by the research results from the university and consortium members. Research teams have been formed and are charged with:

- Determining the training and development needs of Consortium partners
- Identifying organizational learning objectives
- Defining training and development program content
- Determining content delivery methodologies
- Coordinating the program delivery
- Conducting post-program evaluation and feedback

Examples of the targeted technologies the Consortium uses or will be using include:

- Existing databases of training and development products and services
- E-mail, Internet, Intranet, and other communication channels
- Live video-conferencing technologies at members' sites coordinated through the university partners
- Person-to-computer links to key members via e-mail, computer conferencing, video conferencing, Lotus Notes, and other emerging technologies
- Beta-site testing through university partners to evaluate future products and services for consortium members

Members' immediate access to LearnShare resources provides them with leading edge technology for real-time electronic access, and it's electronic library provides information in text form, CD-ROM and photo CDs for downloading through the Internet. Moreover, the consortium is exploring ways to provide "smart" interfaces so that a training manager can be directed to specific materials that fit their particular requirements. This will

provide electronic access that has been expanded beyond simple delivery to provide on-line assistance in the development of individualized training materials.

LearnShare's available training modules include components inherent in all corporate environments and additional modules are created within the dynamic curriculum as the need arises. Any one of the consortium's training managers has access to modules within existing programs to create a program tailored to the needs of his or her audience. In addition, training managers who design their own courses from these materials can then offer these programs back to the library as enhanced material. The smart interface could also be used by individual learners to tailor their instruction by selecting modules that best meet their personal training objectives and essentially designing their own individualized courses.

4. Impact

Critical success factors established by the consortium at its inception include:

- Membership that boasts world-class organizations supporting the consortium concept
- Sharing of best practices by members
- Technologies shared by members
- Development of a market for consortium products
- Open sharing by members of individually developed and individually held training programs
- Establishing shared priorities for training programs
- Maintenance of a strong working relationship between consortium members and university partners
- Grant support obtained by the consortium to develop, implement, and disseminate program innovations

Additionally, consortium members developed a list of objectives to be met that would reduce member's capital investment through:

- Developing a critical mass of world-class partners committed to sharing resources and best practices
- Efficiently producing world-class training modules
- Providing access to world-class training modules through a digital library and state-of-the-art distance-learning technologies
- Joint funding of common training materials
- Maximizing the use of existing resources, facilities, and technologies
- Securing volume discount purchase/licensing rates
- Reducing cycle time from learning to action outcomes
- Achieving improved employee performance
- Securing greater leverage with training vendors resulting in more flexibility in the design and use of vendor-developed products and services
- Exchanging best practices training content and delivery methodologies
- Developing training program evaluative mechanisms
- Developing innovative training delivery strategies

The consortium has developed a quarterly report of all projects and initiatives to be distributed to member organizations. It includes the following information:

- All current projects
- Projects under consideration for next quarter
- Progress-against-plan report from each team
- Strategic analyses from the General Manager addressing the consortium's contribution back to member organizations

The consortium's educational partners are also responsible for validating the quality of its programs.

Although it is too early to quantify the results of the consortium's efforts, there are indicators that the goal is being achieved. One member organization estimates it is saving 30 to 50 percent on the purchase of new training materials. Another partner estimates that it has access to over 40 new programs, which - if the partner had developed them in isolation - would have cost the organization $30,000 to $50,000 each. "We recovered our investment in the first 90 days," he said. For one consortium member, curriculum developers available through the consortium have become his department's development arm.

Member relationships are key to the consortium's success, and members have commented on increased trust and a rising participation level. Members have developed a list of courses they need and are prioritizing their courses' development based on urgency. The members also have extended their relationships to include benchmarking in other business areas.

According to its members, the consortium's e-mail system is an excellent means of gaining access to information and training materials, usually within minutes or hours rather than weeks or months. By "talking" with trainers in other organizations via e-mail, employees have shared training methods, modules, and books, including those housed in the consortium's library or loaned by other members.

The increased interest in membership expressed by companies outside the consortium is another measure of its success. The consortium now looks not only for new members among non-competing and leading-edge companies, but also for value-added additions to the collective whole, and now asks potential candidates to indicate what unique qualities they can bring to the consortium to enhance the contributions to members.

5. Shared Learning

At its earliest stages, the need to create an organized, legally defined structure for the consortium became apparent. Once the consortium institutionalized all rules and procedures that defined LearnShare, participants became more comfortable with the concept, and the definition process helped the consortium focus on its purpose and direction. This also led members to realize that they needed a system to develop priorities that would allow for both democratic voting power and factors that influence choices (such as available funding and long-term benefits).

Another lesson learned was the significance of gaining acceptance and support from the highest levels of every organization involved. The visible encouragement of high-level managers strengthened the consortium and encouraged participation from individuals and their member organizations.

The original mission of the consortium focused on achieving results for its members, yet as the consortium has evolved, it continues to define what best practices are and how the consortium can serve as a model for other collaborative structures. Additionally, as the consortium takes advantage of technology that allows it to distribute its educational materials worldwide, the market for its products and services has become global.

6. Conclusion

The consortium model developed by LearnShare has tremendous potential for improving the quality of education and training in the workplace, government operations, school systems, and other organizations. The State of Ohio, a school district in Las Vegas, Nevada, and the federal government have all expressed an interest in the consortium's model. By collaborating on the design, delivery and distribution of member best practices, the consortium has created opportunities for people to become better employees through improved workplace learning and performance.

The consortium's success changed its member corporations' approach to the purchase and use of interactive training materials. What had started as a simple idea to share resources blossomed into a model for future instructional design, development and delivery.

The synergy of partnering creates timely and effective training at a lower cost, with measurable results, and with significant benefits for participants. Each member brings new ideas and new ways of looking at existing situations that are then shared with the entire LearnShare organization. The level of trust among members grows with the activity of the organization. Formerly isolated, members now feel comfortable sharing best practices and, in return, they can augment their own resources with the best practices learned from others. The wealth of information the consortium has garnered regarding organizing and succeeding as a non-competing collaborative unit can easily be shared with others through presentations and interactive opportunities.

Leadership and outcome-based interventions, combined and multiplied throughout the consortium, provide the curriculum basis for the consortium's virtual classroom of the future. This classroom can access training modules derived from leading-edge research inspired by the consortium's business and education partnerships, and it will deliver them to its participants through existing and emerging technologies. The combination of LearnShare's state-of-the-art realities and future plans will enable the consortium to create for its members the best virtual universities possible.